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The Uncertainty of National and Cultural Identity in Salman Rushdie's *East, West and Midnight's Children*

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**The Uncertainty of National and Cultural Identity in
Salman Rushdie's *East, West* and *Midnight's Children***

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors
Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

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Abstract

This project involves the examination of two works by Salman Rushdie: a short story collection, *East, West* and a novel, *Midnight's Children*. Looking at these texts through a postcolonial lens, I analyze Rushdie's writing in terms of its relationship to the academic debates of the period and the historical context that grounds the works. Throughout the paper, I analyze Rushdie's portrayal of the relationship between culture, nationhood, and identity, while also focusing on different aspects of the works in the project's two chapters. In the first, I examine the relationship between postcolonialism and magical realism in *East, West*, and argue that Rushdie uses a unique hybrid of magical realism, satire, and intertextuality to complicate the portrayal of culture in his stories, as he brings into question the use of the East/West binary that dominated scholarly discourse at the time of these texts' publication. In the project's second chapter I discuss the relationship between *Midnight's Children* and *East, West*, examining on the portrayal of post-independence India and Rushdie's critiques of the Indian government at the time. While in the project's first chapter, stylistic decisions serve as the primary focus of my analysis, in this second part, the relationship between technology and national identity becomes the driving question. Using textual and historical evidence, I demonstrate the extent to which these two texts serve as a statement on the nature of cultural and national identity in the postcolonial era, providing no certain answers but instead raising more questions and illuminating the complexities of global interactions.

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Introduction

In an interview shortly after the publication of his short story collection *East, West* (1994), Rushdie revealed that the book's title was inspired by his personal connection to its subject matter, saying "I said to most people when I started thinking of calling the stories *East, West* that the most important part of the title was the comma. Because it seems to me that I am that comma—or at least I live in the comma...I don't feel like a slash. I feel like a comma."¹ Rushdie inserts himself, and to an extent, all other migrants, into this title by using his own experiences as the reason for his stylistic choice. He presents an intriguing contrast—the possibility that the space between East and West could be either a (metaphorical) physical position or a state of being. By using a comma, which connects the two words rather than divides them, Rushdie demonstrates that what connects East and West are the people who occupy both, who are either living in that hybrid space, or who are the embodiment of that hybrid space. The comma that separates the East from the West plays a key role in the meaning of the phrase. Rather than adhering to the norms of punctuation for the binary phrase and using a slash, Rushdie chooses to show a less abrupt division between the two words, and the two worlds.

¹ Rushdie, Salman, "Homeless is Where the Art Is," 163.

The choice of punctuation is critical verbally and visually: using a comma bridges the two words, allowing a physical space, but no real barrier to exist between “East” and “West.” The comma suggests a connection in the sense that it implies a relationship of similarity, rather than difference, which a slash denotes. Using a slash would cause the title to be interpreted as “East or West,” rather than “East and West,” physically separating the words in the title.

The complex nature of separation, or more specifically fragmentation, is a theme common among Rushdie’s works, as it appears in not only *East, West* but in Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) as well. Arguably his most well-known, and certainly his most lauded work, *Midnight’s Children* portrays the formation and fragmentation of India as a newly independent nation state. In *East, West*, Rushdie addresses the dichotomization of the world into East and West with characters whose lives extend across this separation, like elderly Mary, who lives in England but longs for India so strongly that her heart begins to fail, or Indian intelligence agents Chekov and Zulu who turn their lives into a continuous *Star Trek* episode despite never watching the show. While *East, West* focuses on this fragmentation from a transnational perspective, Rushdie uses *Midnight’s Children*, to examine the internal fractures within India, as its wildly diverse collection of citizens struggle to define their relationship to a nation that is suddenly and undeniably their own. In his epic novel which interweaves the protagonist’s life story

and major events in India's post-independence history, including the linguistic reorganization of states and Pakistan's bid for independence, Rushdie brings into question the meaning of nationhood. Just as in *East, West* Rushdie refuses to accept the simplicity of a world divided into the opposing spheres of East and West, in *Midnight's Children* he demonstrates that a nation is defined by far more than its borders.

In these two texts, Rushdie addresses the fluid and uncertain nature of cultural and national identity. In *East, West* he complicates the status of culture in a postcolonial setting, playing with Oriental stereotypes and manipulating Western classics in his stories which portray characters, many of whom embark on migratory journeys that raise questions about the relationship between home and identity, and the results of the loss thereof. What is lost in *East, West* seems to be gained in *Midnight's Children*, as the story revolves around the experience of India's newfound independence after England withdraws its colonial regime from the nation. But just as *East, West* addresses the struggles of the loss of cultural identity, *Midnight's Children* demonstrates that the creation of national identity is equally challenging. In one text homes and freedoms are woefully abandoned and in the other they are triumphantly obtained but both works reveal the uncertainty that accompanies the fallout of colonial and postcolonial relationships.

This fallout comes to a head in both texts, and is especially pertinent to *East, West*'s "The Free Radio," a story set during the same

historical event which instigates the climax of *Midnight's Children*. Ramani, the protagonist in "The Free Radio," and Saleem, *Midnight's Children's* narrator and hero, both face a formidable opponent in the Indian government and Indira Gandhi during the Indian Emergency.² In the two texts, radios play a central role as Ramani so longs for a transistor radio of his own that he mimics the broadcasts of All India Radio, and Saleem, instilled since birth with telepathic abilities, acts as a transmitter himself. Given the stories' interests in identity, and the relationship between East and West, these radios carry symbolic weight, as they serve as agents central to the development of national identity, broadcasting information that is consumed by the public and controlled by the government. As the state attempts to recover from the influence of Western powers, the radio becomes an increasingly important device, a technology of coercion and revolution which has come into play not only in Rushdie's texts, but in a multitude of historical conflicts between the colonized and colonizer; between East and West.

Somehow, it all comes back to those same two words, separated by a comma and containing within them a host of allusions and thematic references. "East, West" suggests a well-known phrase that relate to the content of the text. The saying "East, West, Home's Best" could have been part of the inspiration for this book's title, and it carries with it

² The Indian Emergency was a period of 21 months in which Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India at the time, declared a state of emergency which resulted in the restriction of civil liberties, censorship, and most relevantly here, a program of population control involving sometimes coerced vasectomies (Malhotra).

several meanings. Damian Grant, a Rushdie biographer, writes that the proverb can be interpreted in several ways. There is a “nineteenth-century imperialist, xenophobic reading [‘Whether you travel to the east or the west, home (back in England) is the best’]” or the “twentieth-century, post-colonial, culturally pluralistic reading [‘Whether you live in the east or the west, your home there is the best place to be’].” (Grant 100). It is unlikely that Rushdie would agree with either of these interpretations. In a collection of his nonfiction he describes the phrase as “sickly sweet,”³ comparing it to the trite aphorism of “there’s no place like home” from *The Wizard of Oz*.⁴ While *East, West* is certainly a testament to the power of cultural pluralism, the idea that home is “the best place to be” stands in opposition with Rushdie’s views on migration and exploration. Both *East, West* and *Midnight’s Children*, with their discussion of cultural and national identity make it clear: neither nation nor culture are fixed entities, and instead, as the stories reveal, their statuses are as uncertain as they are important. Perhaps that is why Rushdie finds the story of migrancy so appealing; migration, as Rushdie portrays it, allows for not only acceptance, but also appreciation, of the uncertainty of identity and the endless evolution of cultural and national interactions. As Rushdie stated, in his discussion of the significance of “Over the Rainbow,” “It is a

³ Rushdie, Salman, *Step Across This Line*

⁴ A film that Rushdie has not only analyzed extensively but also included in *East, West* as the inspiration for “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers.” The film’s villain, the Wicked Witch is featured extensively in “The Free Radio” and *Midnight’s Children*, in a thinly veiled reference to Indira Gandhi.

celebration of *Escape*, a grand paean to the uprooted self, a hymn—the hymn—to Elsewhere.”⁵

Chapter 1: Postcolonialism, Magical Realism, and Intertextuality in Rushdie’s *East, West*

In the concluding lines of the final story in *East, West*, the narrator proclaims, “I too, have ropes around my neck, I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose...Ropes, I do not choose between you...I choose neither of you, and both.”⁶ Just as the narrator of this story, entitled “The Courter,” ultimately rejects the pressure to choose between worlds, Rushdie expresses a similar distaste for simplicity and separation throughout *East, West*. In both content and style, Rushdie’s desire to remain in an undefined, ambivalent space is clear in his stories, as he allows his characters to live in both East and West and maintains a writing style that cannot be constrained within a singular genre. The text’s political and social stakes, as the stories focus on issues of migration and cultural relations, are expressed and enhanced by the aesthetics of *East, West*. This relationship between Rushdie’s magical realist style and his expression of the complexities surrounding the East/West binary is a critical aspect of *East, West*.

⁵ Rushdie, Salman, *Step Across This Line*.

⁶ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 211.

Divided into three geographic categories (“East,” “West,” and “East, West”) *East, West*’s stories, which are set primarily in England and India, deal with issues of cultural difference and themes of migration and homelessness. The organization of the distinct sections of *East, West* is also of interest, with the more realistic preoccupations that dominate the first section (East) contrasting with the more dreamlike and almost absurd tone of the second section (West). Though this contrast is purposely undermined by the last story in the first section, which takes on the qualities that readers would expect from a classic, exotic fable, Rushdie plays with his readers’ expectations as he applies the stereotyped tropes of Orientalist writings to his stories about the West, and uses a more realistic, rational, “Western” tone in the text’s “East” section. The categorization of stories in this collection is particularly significant in terms of Rushdie’s manipulation of the East/West binary that is central to postcolonial literature. This text examines the oppositions between East and West (in terms of both the sections of the text and the cultural regions) as well as immigrants and natives, colonizers and colonized—oppositions that by no means remain simple or completely separate. For Rushdie, categories and the boundaries between them do not hold true, both in terms of the division of his book’s sections, and in terms of the construction and perception of the migrant communities.

In *East, West* Rushdie utilizes a unique hybrid of magical realism and satire to complicate the status of “culture” itself in the postcolonial

era, as his stories work against the dominant colonial discourse that positions East and West as wholly distinct entities. Rushdie's presentation of this argument, a vital aspect of *East, West's* political meaning, is reinforced by his personal migratory experiences, which place him in a space that he describes as the comma in *East, West's* title—a hybrid space in which *East, West's* characters are positioned. Rushdie complicates the construction of the East/West binary; instead of placing East and West in opposition, he merges them through elements of intertextuality and interconnection among the varying stories. He allows for the erosion of boundaries in the East/West binary and portrays a hybrid space in their place.

Postcolonial Debates in the 1990s

In order to define the extent to which *East, West* differs from the conventional portrayals of cultural difference, it is first necessary to define these conventions. *East, West* was published in the mid-90s, a period in which John McLeod, author of *Beginning Postcolonialism*, claims “postcolonialism [had] become increasingly busy and academically fashionable.”⁷ The critical activity at the time, he reports, “attended more closely to the cultural and historical specifics of literature from particular locations...there [was] the risk that a more comparative approach to postcolonial literatures [was] lost.”⁸ Rushdie avoids a location-specific perspective by creating sections for the East and West in order to include

⁷ McLeod, John, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 29.

⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

stories that range in setting. By writing stories for the “East, West” section which specifically takes a comparative approach, he does not confine his stories regionally within those sections. “Good Advice is Rarer Than Rubies,” for example, is in the “East” section, but takes place in England. Rushdie uses the separation that is created by the collection’s categories to indicate that due to the growing global interconnectedness that results from processes of colonialism, migration, and globalization, cultures and characters are too complex to be contained within straightforward boundaries, be it the constraints of the three sections in *East, West* or the restraints of a simple East/West binary.

A critical concept to postcolonial theory, and the key binary that Rushdie deconstructs in his stories, is this East/West opposition. This binary played a major role in imperialistic discourse, usually taking the form of racism in discussion of the inferiority of “Eastern” cultures. Its relevance remained apparent as imperialistic discourse gave way to postcolonial studies and imperialism came to an end, with European empires falling and independent nation-states emerging in their place. While the idea of Western cultural superiority over Eastern inferiority is now recognized as prejudiced and uninformed, the dominance of the West over the East in terms of imperialist regimes and in academic discourse is undeniable. Edward Said explains in *Orientalism* that, “The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ but also

because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental.”⁹

Orientalists in the nineteenth century were able to speak for the Orient.

Said uses the example of French author Gustave Flaubert’s writings about an “Oriental woman,” saying that there were “historical facts of domination that allowed him...to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental’... [this] stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.”¹⁰ Currently there is a far wider range of postcolonial writers who address colonization and its effects from the East’s perspective, but the East/West binary is steeped in a history of inequality.

In 1993, a few years prior to the publication of *East, West*, Samuel Huntington released his seminal article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” in *Foreign Affairs*. When Huntington coined the phrase, “clash of civilizations,” he described seven or eight cultural entities that would inevitably lead to conflict, as he reexamined cultural relations in the post Cold War era. He wrote, “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic... [it] will be cultural.”¹¹ While Huntington’s theory was and still is influential for scholars and policymakers alike, and garnered more attention in the wake of the attacks on September 11, his ideas were extremely polarizing. To some extent, his paper supported the ideology behind “the West versus the rest,” with statements like, “[The West]

⁹ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 75.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Huntington, Samuel, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, 1.

confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways¹² contributing to its controversial position and creating a threatening image of the non-West as a homogenized, undifferentiated culture that is vastly different from the West. For Huntington, and for Rushdie, culture is ultimately the point of contestation, as they hold vastly divergent perspectives on the effects of cultural differences between East and West.

The relationship between the Western and non-Western spheres was a dominant concept during this period (and it continues to be today), as globalization gained speed in the post-Cold War era. Benjamin R. Barber argues in his 1992 article “Jihad vs. McWorld,”¹³ that globalization is “pressing nations into one commercially homogenous global network.”¹⁴ While not a response to Huntington, Barber poses an alternate hypothesis, claiming that instead of producing separate civilizations that would ultimately clash with each other, the powers of globalization will homogenize cultures.¹⁵ Said also posed alternative ideas to Huntington’s, in his argument against the theory of the clash of civilization. His article, “The Clash of Ignorance,” was published years after Rushdie wrote *East, West* but it is nonetheless a useful summation of the problematic nature of Huntington’s ideas—ideas which Rushdie implicitly contests, and ideas that were certainly a dominant part of postcolonial discourse at the time of

¹² Ibid, 3.

¹³ “Jihad vs. McWorld” was published in *The Atlantic* a year before Huntington’s thesis.

¹⁴ Barber, Benjamin, “Jihad vs. McWorld.”

¹⁵ Rushdie contests this idea in *East, West*, and also challenges Huntington’s ideas about the oppositional positioning of East and West.

East, West's publication. Said writes, "The basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated) remained untouched...At some level, for instance, primitive passions and sophisticated know-how converge in ways that give the lie to a fortified boundary" (The Clash of Ignorance). It was in this context that *East, West* was published.¹⁶ These debates about East and West are relevant in terms of *East, West*, as well as Rushdie's life. The parallels between Rushdie's own experiences and experiences of *East, West*'s characters are revealed in his interviews, as he discusses the motivation behind his work.

Rushdie recounts his experiences with migration, as he travelled from India to England in his childhood and later to America, saying his writing "[has] to do with where [he] came from, and trying to lay claim to it and to understand it in a new way."¹⁷ *East, West* addresses the experiences of the migrant, who Rushdie claims "is the defining image of the 20th century...so many people in the human race have ended up in places in which they did not begin."¹⁸ While Huntington saw the world's civilizations as discrete entities, Rushdie's perspective is grounded in integration:

Bombay, where I grew up, was a city in which the West
was totally mixed up with the East...my life [has] given me

¹⁶ While some of the stories were written earlier, in the eighties, the majority of the stories were written in the late eighties and early nineties, while this debate was at its peak. "Free Radio," "The Prophet's Hair," and "Yorick," were published in the early eighties; "Good Advice is Rarer Than Rubies" in 1987; and "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers" and "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship, Santa Fe, January, 1492" were published in 1991.

¹⁷ Rushdie, Salman, "Homeless is Where the Art Is."

¹⁸ Rushdie, Salman, "Interview at San Francisco State University, the Poetry Center."

the ability to make stories in which different parts of the world are brought together, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in conflict.¹⁹

Rushdie recognizes both the historical and contemporary conflicts between Europe and the non-Occidental world, a conflict spanning centuries back to the medieval era's wars between Jews, Christians and Muslims and continuing on today as the effects of the West's imperialistic ventures in the East are still felt throughout the globe. But he also sees the shared characteristics in these areas, an interrelatedness that scholars like Huntington don't seem willing to recognize. This phrase "mixed up" is critical in terms of Rushdie's own experiences, and his perspective on postcolonial cultures. In an interview, he discussed the shared "ex-colonial" status held by India and the U.S., saying, "They're both cultures made up of mixtures...made up of people who come from elsewhere...They're both mixed up people."²⁰ This perspective, of the blending of cultures creating people who are "mixed up," is a key point in "The Courter," which features a character whose name is simplified from a complex foreign name with "invisible accents" from "some Iron Curtain language" to the much more pronounceable "Mixed-Up."²¹

Rushdie's collection of stories responds to the changing worldviews in the post-Cold War era, as he complicates the simple opposition that Huntington supports, with stories that reflect the

¹⁹ Livings, Jack, "Paris Review – The Art of Fiction No. 186, Salman Rushdie."

²⁰ Rose, Charlie, "Conversations with Salman Rushdie."

²¹ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 179.

interactive nature of culture in the postcolonial world. The intertextual nature of *East, West* allows Rushdie to clearly communicate his ideas without confining his points within the boundaries of a single story, and to expose his readers to the power of globalization, using technology and science fiction as symbols of Western influence. He reimagines the boundaries of the world's geographies as he positions the West as an exotic "other," and manipulates the style of magical realism in order to take apart the classic constructions of East and West.

Postcolonialism and Magical Realism

In "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism," Wendy Faris points out that magical realism creates two opposing systems—the fantastic and the real. That opposition is critical to the narrative itself, which becomes a hybrid formed from the sustained opposition between the two systems. Magical realism, Faris argues, offers an alternative to the more conventional European realism and allows writers to resist the West's conventions of rationalism. Since one of the primary issues that postcolonial writers have to address is the necessity of writing in English, the language of the colonial regime, magical realism can provide a level of liberation from the colonizer's language. Faris states, "The fact that realism purports to give an accurate picture of the world, based in fidelity to empirical evidence, and that it is a European import, have led to its being experienced by writers in colonized

societies...as the language of the colonizer.”²² Magical realism offers an escape from that, allowing postcolonial writers to deny or challenge the influence of the colonizing culture.

Despite the genre’s popularity, magical realism remains subject to debate in terms of its position in the postcolonial canon. While a vast array of well-known postcolonial writers, from Rushdie to Alejo Carpentier to Ben Okri, use magical realism in their texts, scholarly disagreement about the impact of the style on the postcolonial genre still exists. Faris summarizes both sides of the argument:

The status of magical realism, its widespread popularity, and the critical use of the term are the subject of debate because at the same time that it is acknowledged by some as a significant decolonizing style, permitting new voices and traditions to be heard within the mainstream, it is denigrated...as a commodifying kind of primitivism that, like the Orientalism analyzed by Edward Said and his successors, relegates colonies and their traditions to the role of cute, exotic psychological fantasies.²³

Rushdie avoids this issue with *East, West* by writing a collection of short stories that involves characters on both sides of the postcolonial binary. By using magical realism in a variety of settings that span from the first world to the third world, Rushdie challenges the division between East and West, supporting the ideas put forward several decades earlier by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said states, “The Orient is not an inert fact of nature...Such

²² Faris, Wendy, “The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism,” 103.

²³ *Ibid*, 101.

locales, regions, geographical sectors as ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are man-made...The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.”²⁴ By complicating the relationship beyond the simple East/West, colonized/colonizer binaries, Rushdie creates an image of the postcolonial world that is both interconnected and confusing—a mixed up world that doesn’t fit into neat binaries and geographical boundaries.

This interconnectedness is expressed through the intertextual relationships *East, West*’s stories. The relationship between “At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers” (herein referred to as “Ruby Slippers”) (West) and “The Prophet’s Hair” (East) serves an example of this intertextuality, two very different stories that both comment on the same issue of fetishization.²⁵ That Rushdie uses magical realism in vastly different ways in the two stories, setting one in the exotic locale of the East and the other in a dystopian future in the West, reveals the extent to which he manipulates the conventions of magical realism, as he uses magical realism in varying ways, and he doesn’t use it consistently. Instead of employing one style throughout the book, Rushdie does not employ the features of magical realism in all of his stories. The collection’s formal qualities parallel the point that Rushdie makes with the content of the text itself, as the stories’ varied styles and tones make the

²⁴ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, 17.

²⁵ Throughout this paper, various stories in *East, West* will be paired for analysis. By doing so, the similar (and dissimilar) attributes between stories can be emphasized, as another example of the interconnected nature of the text. Though the pairings may seem somewhat arbitrary, the stories that are compared each share key elements (i.e. fetishization in these two stories).

text one that does not adhere to the norms of a single specific genre. This stylistic complexity mirrors the complexities of the Orient/Occident relationship, and reinforces the idea that relationship between East and West extends beyond a simple oppositional binary.

Rushdie's Magical Realism

In order to argue effectively that *East, West* demonstrates the power of magical realism as a technique in postcolonial literature, it is first necessary to explain why *East, West* can be defined as a magical realist text. Faris describes key elements in the genre;

Most essential among my criteria for inclusion in the mode of magical realism is the existence of an 'irreducible element' that is unexplainable according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated by modern, post-enlightenment empiricism...In other words, magical realism is a combination of realism and the fantastic in which the former predominates.²⁶

Throughout *East, West*, Rushdie uses elements of magical realism, but in a variety of ways that extends beyond Faris's definition of combined fantasy and realism. Though this is certainly one aspect of the style that Rushdie employs, he takes the style further towards the absurd. His use of well-known Western stories in the "West" section serves as a key example of the text's absurdity. In "Yorick," Rushdie irreverently takes on Shakespeare, retelling *Hamlet* from the perspective of a descendant of Hamlet's court jester Yorick, whom the narrator claims was Ophelia's

²⁶ Faris, Wendy, "The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism," 102.

wife, and whom Hamlet convinced to kill the king. In a final disruption of Shakespeare's tale, the narrator ends by saying "Yorick's child survives...wanders the world, sowing his seed in far-off lands, from west to east and back again; and multicoloured generations follow..."²⁷ In terms of both content and style ("Yorick" is filled with exclamation points, interjections, capitalized phrases, etc.), the story is unusual to say the least, and it lacks realism to such an extent that Faris's requirement that realism predominates over the fantastic may not be fulfilled here, except for the fact that "Yorick" is modeled after a Shakespearean story (one which contains its own elements of fantasy, as it includes ghosts, visions, and madness), supplying the story with a different form of conformity to literary conventions. In this sense, Rushdie manages to adhere to magical realist conventions in unconventional ways.

Rushdie's unique use of magical realism can also be seen in "The Harmony of the Spheres," one of the stories in the text's "East, West" section. One of the story's main characters, Eliot Crane,²⁸ has schizophrenia, and as Khan, the story's narrator, describes Eliot's illness,

²⁷ Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 83.

²⁸ The name "Eliot Crane" references T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Hart Crane (1899-1932), two famous Modernist poets, whose lives share many similarities with aspects of "The Harmony of the Spheres." Crane struggled with alcohol abuse and committed suicide relatively early in life (age 32), as did Eliot Crane. He was inspired by Eliot's poetry and strived to write a work as epic and influential as Eliot's "The Wasteland" (The Poetry Foundation). Eliot, who was born in America but moved to the United Kingdom and became a naturalized citizen at age 39, was one of the foremost poets of his time, and is well-known for his 434-line poem, "The Wasteland," which is considered to be the single most important poetic work of the 20th century. This poem describes the human soul's search for redemption, and is known for "its radical departure from traditional poetic style and structure, incorporating historical and literary allusions as well as unconventional use of language" (Bartleby), elements that parallel themes of "The Harmony of the Spheres" and the stylistic aspects of *East, West* as a whole.

his portrayal of the delusions which afflict Eliot take on a fantastic tone with elements that are reminiscent of science fiction:

Eliot had elaborated a conspiracy theory in which most of his friends were revealed to be agents of hostile powers, both Earthly and extra-terrestrial. I was an invader from Mars, one of many such dangerous beings who had sneaked into Britain when certain essential forms of vigilance had been relaxed. Martians had great gifts of mimicry...²⁹

Rushdie tackles several issues in this passage, as he combines a discussion of Eliot's mental instability while also alluding to Khan's experiences as an Indian immigrant in England. In this sense, Rushdie uses a manipulated form of magical realism, as he uses Eliot's (literally) insane perspective to describe the problems that accompany Khan's real-life situations, changing the recounting of Eliot's paranoid delusions significantly when the narrator switches from third to first person. The first statement describes Eliot's fantasies, and because Khan labels them as "conspiracy [theories]," it is clear that there is a separation of reality and delusion. Since Khan uses the third person in this description, he distances himself from not only the statement he makes, but also from Eliot's conspiracies. But in the next sentence, Khan changes to the first person, saying "I was an invader from Mars..." so that it reads like fact, not fantasy. This is partially because it is fact, figuratively speaking. In Eliot's fantasies, Khan is an alien who managed to sneak into the country, a successful mimic of English culture, while in reality Khan actually is an alien, in terms of

²⁹ Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 127.

immigration (His wife, Mala is from Mauritius—she is one vowel away from being a true “Martian.”). The “spheres” (to use Eliot’s word) of insanity and sanity, fantastic and real, are blended here, as Eliot’s delusions are partially accurate. As Khan describes it, when he discovers the truth behind more of Eliot’s “delusions” (the stories of Mala and Eliot’s affair that Khan discovers turn out to be true), “So, here it came. The collapse of harmony, the demolition of my heart.”³⁰

East, West grapples with the cultural questions that result from migratory experiences, and uses realistic characters as vehicles to communicate these ideas. This realism is blended with moments of fantasy and absurd situations, as in “Ruby Slippers.” Rushdie explores themes of identity and homelessness, as well as discussing the power and danger of fictions in this story which is set in a dystopian future and based upon the 1990 auction of the ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*³¹—one of the most beloved fantasies in American cinema. The unidentified narrator informs readers of this auction’s intensity, as “units of obstetricians and helmeted police SWAT teams wait out of sight in side alleys in case the excitement leads to unexpected births or deaths.”³² Rushdie’s matter-of-fact tone is consistent throughout this story, contrasting with the extremely problematic environment and exaggerated public woes that dominate the text.

³⁰ Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 146.

³¹ A film which makes appearances throughout *Midnight’s Children* as well

³² Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 87.

The departure from realism into fantasy and hyperbole is apparent immediately, as the narrator describes the celebrities attending the auction, explaining how “movie star auras, developed in collaboration with masters of Applied Physics, are platinum, golden, silver, bronze. Certain genre actors specialising in villainous roles are surrounded by auras of evil.”³³ With this image, Rushdie introduces one of the key themes in the story: the yearning for identity and the fetishization of material goods (in this case the ruby slippers) as a means of fulfilling that need. Though the story is set in the future, and is filled with unrealistic, fantastic elements, it still offers a serious critique of Western society’s materialism and consumer-driven nature. While the prophet’s hair in an earlier story in the “East” section serves as a symbol for the problematic nature of religious extremism, the ruby slippers in this story stand as an icon for consumer culture. “Ruby Slippers” explores the continuation of this commodity-based society, examining the consequences of allowing material desires to overpower all other aspects of life.

This fixation on the material is dangerous, as it leads the public to believe in the false security and comfort of consumer culture. As the narrator demonstrates, there is already erosion of separation between the fictional and the real in this story’s society. Rushdie describes “the presence of imaginary beings” at the auction: “Children from nineteenth-century Australian paintings are here...on a television monitor, I notice the

³³ Ibid, 88.

frail figure of an alien creature with an illuminated fingertip.”³⁴ Rushdie references classic markers of Western culture, from art of past centuries to the more modern popular culture of cinema, with an allusion to *E.T.* (a fitting choice, given E.T.’s fixation on returning to his home). Without identities of their own, lacking the celebrity status to gain custom-designed, “movie star auras,”³⁵ the public brings the fictional world into the real world in order to create a sense of self. With his reference to auras, Rushdie makes a subtle nod to Walter Benjamin, who developed the idea of aura in his seminal text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*. Though Benjamin’s theory was originally about art, his idea of auras, as applied by Rushdie, relates to absolute uniqueness and irreproducibility—art can be reproduced but an aura cannot. As Benjamin states, “Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter [original art] as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former [reproduced art].”³⁶ By taking on this concept and suggesting that in this alternate reality, auras themselves are reproducible, Rushdie makes it clear that nothing is sacred and everything is commodified—even the human soul. The narrator of “Ruby Slippers” notes,

This permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture...There can be little doubt that a large majority of us opposes the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary

³⁴ Ibid, 94.

³⁵ Ibid, 88.

³⁶ Benjamin, Walter, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.”

beings into an already damaged reality, whose resources diminish day by day.³⁷

Taking on the language of current immigration debates, Rushdie ironically combines a fantastic element of his story with actual issues in today's society, reminding his readers that this story is about ideas that are grounded in reality, not fantasy. He also alludes to the role of fiction here, as the "migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality" can also refer to the idea of a text like *East, West* being created and read.

This ironic tone, blended with elements of magical realism, is apparent throughout the stories in *East, West*. "The Prophet's Hair," the final story in the text's "East" section, plays into Orientalist stereotypes (i.e. superstitious beliefs, a ritualized representation of religion). As Madalena Gonzalez explains in *Fiction After the Fatwa*, the story "seems to have come straight out of *The Arabian Nights* and reinstates the fantasy world of Orientalism."³⁸ "The Prophet's Hair," which grapples with the problematic nature of religious extremism, is filled with references to miracles and superstitions (such as the blood of sacrificed chickens, relic worship, and djinn [spirits with supernatural powers in Muslim legends]) fantastic elements that Rushdie still grounds in realism. When several characters who suffered from physical disabilities and made their living as beggars on the streets are miraculously healed, "They were, all four of them, very properly furious, because the miracle had reduced their earning power by 75 per cent, at the most conservative estimate; so they were

³⁷ Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 94.

³⁸ Gonzalez, Madelena, "Fiction After the Fatwa," 17.

ruined men.”³⁹ Combining the fantastic with reality, Rushdie not only utilizes magical realism exactly as Faris defines the style, but he also juxtaposes the elements to create an ironic conclusion to an otherwise stereotypical “Orientalist” story, reminding readers of the clichéd nature of that genre. A key aspect of Orientalist discourse is the concept that part of the non-West’s supposed backwardness stems from the belief in magic and miracles, which is infused in everyday life in the East. “The Prophet’s Hair” offers a critique of the extent to which religious superstition becomes commodified, as material objects are believed to possess magical properties. But Rushdie responds to this story with his parallel critique of the West’s capitalistic society in “Ruby Slippers.” In both stories the use of magical realism is a clear example of the style as Faris describes it, and an example of Rushdie’s ability to manipulate the style to serve his purpose and make his point about the interconnected nature of the East/West relationship.

The Exoticized West

The relationship between “Good Advice is Rarer Than Rubies” (herein referred to as “Good Advice”) and “Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate their Relationship (*Santa Fé, AD 1492*)” (herein referred to as “Christopher Columbus”) serves as an example of Rushdie’s manipulation of *East, West*’s organization and consequently, of the roles of East and West in their typically oppositional positions. “Good Advice” is the first story in the book, and though it is

³⁹ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West* 78.

placed in the text's "East" section, the story's setting cannot be categorized so simply. Though the events take place in India, they occur at the British Consulate, as Miss Rehana attempts to secure passage to England. As a result, the story is set in and around a hybrid space, since the British Consulate, despite its location in India, is technically British soil—it is an area in India in which the British government still has authority. Thus, from the very start of *East, West*, Rushdie complicates the idea of geographical boundaries. He also immediately introduces the idea of migration as a critical theme of the text, with this story centering around an Indian woman's planned move to England from India, as she is preparing to marry an Indian man in England, fulfilling a union her parents planned for her when she was a child. But despite her intentions to travel, she ultimately decides to remain in India, so the only travelling she undertakes is the journey from Lahore to the Consulate, on a bus which ferries "Tuesday women," women who are attempting to leave India for England. The story begins with the bus, as it arrives at the Consulate with Rehana aboard, and ends with the bus's departure, as Rehana returns to Lahore. This journey serves a microcosm of the migratory experience Rehana had planned, as she ends up visiting a representation of the West rather than the actual place. As a result, England remains an elusive concept rather than a concrete image, since the country is discussed but never described. In a book about the experience of migration and the relationship between East and West, Rushdie begins with a story that is

rooted in the East, in a space where the West can't extend beyond a single building, and a distant idea.

In "Good Advice," Rushdie uses Rehana's independence to make it clear that the experiences of women in areas like India, who are generally assumed by the first world to live in conditions which are less "civilized" than in the West, are not necessarily worse off than they would be in first world nations like England. This is communicated through Rushdie's physical descriptions of Rehana, as he explains that "the Consulate was already full of Tuesday women, some veiled, a few barefaced like Miss Rehana."⁴⁰ Set apart from the majority of the other women, who wear veils, Rehana's characterization as an independent woman stands in contrast with her apparent willingness to leave her home and take part in an arranged marriage, with a man she does not know. It is a relief, then, when Rehana purposefully answers the immigration officials' questions incorrectly. She tells Ali what happened, saying "Old man...why have you already packed me up and posted me off to England?'... 'I got all their questions wrong'... 'Now I will go back to Lahore and my job."⁴¹ The language here demonstrates Rehana's agency, and her determination to decide the course of her life for herself, as she defies Said's example of Oriental submission, in which Flaubert's "Oriental woman" lacked agency or individualism. Instead, she controls her own fate, and she rebukes Ali for his assumption that she would do as

⁴⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid, 15.

he expected. With this interaction, Rushdie reveals that it is possible to lead a desirable life without migrating from the East. In India, Rehana is independent, with a good job, while in England, her future is unknown—she knows only that she would be married to a man thirty years her senior. Rushdie suggests that for Rehana, the conditions of the third world have yet to affect her in India, but she may very well experience less independence, and more gender and/or racial discrimination in England. In this story, it is the “East” that is safe, while Rehana, and the readers, know little more about England than they do about Rehana’s rejected spouse.

Despite the placement of “Christopher Columbus” in the “West” section of this text, the story serves a similar purpose as “Good Advice,” as it portrays America as a mythical, undiscovered land. The pairing of these stories reveals the complicated nature of the East/West relationship, as this story, set in Spain, addresses the relationship between Europe and America, which are united as the West when placed in opposition with India and neighboring countries. But in this story, America is as exotic, desirable and enticingly unknown, as the East was to Orientalists, a parallel that serves as a reminder that binary positions are not necessarily permanent, since America was once on the “other” side of the colonial binary. The date, which is brought to readers’ attention in the title, is 1492, making it clear that Rushdie wants the connection between this story and Columbus’s famous “discovery” of America to be recognized. However, just as Rushdie plays with classic Western tales with his manipulation of

Hamlet in “Yorick” and *The Wizard of Oz* in “Ruby Slippers,” he also uses reverence for Christopher Columbus, seen as both an intrepid explorer and a figure of colonial repression, as another opportunity for the manipulation of the West’s classic tales. The reference to the date ensures that readers are aware of the theme of conquest, and Rushdie makes this impossible to miss as he uses the simplistic saying of schoolchildren. He writes, “[Columbus] has hopes...of, in fourteen hundred ninety two, sailing across the ocean blue,”⁴² a rhyme which serves as a reminder of the societal admiration for Columbus despite his misdeeds, but which in the context of Rushdie’s stories, also demonstrates the simplicity of such a viewpoint. Rushdie associates Columbus’s desire to explore the New World with his desire to have sex with Queen Isabella, so that the conquest of a continent is likened to the conquest of a queen. This notion of the duality of exploration is also noticeable in the story’s title, as the setting is “Santa Fe,” a region in Spain and a city in the United States. Rushdie chooses to use an area of the United States that is associated with the Wild West, introducing the idea of conquest and exploration even though the story is about a different type of conquest entirely.

Rushdie refutes Huntington’s division of the world into the “West versus the rest,” by demonstrating that the spaces of the world cannot be so cleanly defined and reminds readers of the relative, fluid nature of the term “foreigner.” Throughout the story Columbus is characterized as an outsider, and mocked for his status as a foreigner. Confined to a pig sty,

⁴² Ibid, 107.

Columbus is ridiculed by the Queen's heralds, who overtly state one of the key points in the story when they say, "[Foreigners] are, moreover, a warning against complacency, their existence in our midst reminding us that there are quarters in which (hard as it is to accept) we ourselves would be considered foreign too."⁴³ The language here is an example of the thinking that Rushdie opposes: the concept of a world that can be neatly divided into quarters. This idea suggests a level of organization and simplicity surrounding the relationship between differing areas and cultures, but *East, West* reveals this relationship to be far more complex. Queen Isabella forces Columbus to wait for her decision about patronage, toying with him as she agrees to fulfill his wishes one day and banishes him the next. This constant back-and-forth tension dominates the story, as Columbus is pulled in different directions. He is in the East but longs for the West, and at the story's end, the contradiction of his internal debate is revealed even further when, after hearing that Queen Isabella has summoned him and agreed to fund his voyage, "[Columbus] opens his mouth, and what spills out is the bitter refusal: no. 'Yes,' he tells the heralds. *Yes. I'll come.*"⁴⁴ Rushdie emphasizes the contradiction by placing "no" and "yes" in direct, immediate opposition, and blurring Columbus's introspection with the narration of the action, so Columbus's internal decision to say "no" seems to really occur. Even a yes or no

⁴³ Ibid, 108.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 119.

question can't remain simple in *East, West*, as Rushdie uses Columbus's indecision in a manner not unlike Rehana's uncertainty in "Good Advice."

Just as there is much more to a yes or no question than the answer that is spoken, there is more to migration than the idea of India versus England or Spain versus America. Rushdie complicates the issue beyond the simplicity of here versus there. In this story, America is the unknown exotic land (and in "Good Advice" it is England). The concept of America as foreign mirrors the image as Columbus as a foreigner, except that while Columbus is denigrated for his status, America is exoticized. It is elusive and exciting, and will be, as readers know, extremely profitable. Rushdie achieves a reversal of the positions of East and West in this story, but he can't portray a complete switch of the binary because of the readers' unavoidable knowledge of America's current status. In the story, the Queen's heralds deride Columbus, describing him as "the drunkard, his huge shaggy head filled with nonsenses! A fool with a glittering eye dreaming of a golden paradise beyond the Western Edge of Things."⁴⁵ This statement, though it mocks Columbus's idealism, creates an image of the West as a perfect, untouched land, and the term "Western Edge of Things," with its officious capital letters, contributes to the idea that nothing, or at least nothing meaningful, exists beyond the "edge" of the civilized world. But the readers (and Rushdie) knows that this isn't true. With this unusual take on Columbus, Rushdie communicates the idea that

⁴⁵ Ibid, 109.

foreignness is a relative idea, and that even revered figures can be pushed to the fringes of society by circumstance.

There is no certainty, and no permanence in *East, West*, as figures of Western culture that seem so dependable, like Shakespeare and Columbus, are taken apart in the text, and the readers' uncertainty is increased by the lack of magical realist elements in either "Christopher Columbus" or "Good Advice." In contrast with "The Prophet's Hair" and "Ruby Slippers," which contain classic magical realist aspects and more manipulated, satiric elements, these two stories lack an obvious "irreducible element." In "Good Advice," Rushdie flirts with fantastic elements but his descriptions are ambiguous, as the power of Rehana's eyes hovers between fantasy and hyperbole. He describes Rehana, saying "Miss Rehana's eyes were large and black and bright enough not to need to the help of antimony, and when the advice expert Muhammad Ali saw them he felt himself becoming young again...The lala, usually so rude to the Consulate's Tuesday women, answered Miss Rehana with something like courtesy" (*East, West* 5). Throughout the story, there are references to Rehana's eyes, as they do "bad things to [Ali's] digestive tract."⁴⁶ and Ali imagines "British sahibs...drowning in her eyes."⁴⁷ These scenes are ambiguous, as Rushdie could simply be describing the effect of a beautiful woman on a man in an exaggerated style. But in the context of Rushdie's other stories, in which there are more overtly fantastic elements, it is

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 13.

possible that he means these images to be interpreted literally, that Rehana's beauty is actually physically affecting Ali, and that she can use her appearance to change people's personalities to benefit her.

"Christopher Columbus" is similarly ambiguous. While it contains a multitude of stylistic elements reflective of Rushdie's writing throughout *East, West*, with shifting narrators, capitalized phrases, and offhand allusions to historical events, the magical realist elements are much harder to clearly identify. The story as a whole feels removed from reality, given its departure from historical facts, but within the framework of that narrative, there is a fairly consistent level of realism. This shifts at the end of the story, however, with Columbus and Isabella's shared dream. Rushdie describes how Columbus "walks beyond fatigue...somewhere along this path he loses his balance, he falls off the edge of his sanity, and out here beyond his mind's rim he sees, for the first and only time in his life, a vision."⁴⁸ Rushdie guides the readers here, as Columbus's fall from a state of wakefulness and sanity mirrors the story's departure from realism, in a manner similar to Rushdie's portrayal of Eliot's schizophrenia in "The Harmony of the Spheres," though this story leaves behind the realistic world entirely, rather than locating that departure within one character's mind. Because the events that follow Columbus's fall into sleep are prefaced with the fact that we are "beyond [Columbus's] mind's rim," the fantastic nature of shared visions and prophetic dreams seem more realistically grounded. Rushdie writes that, "It is a dream of a

⁴⁸ Ibid, 115.

dream...[Isabella] is staring into a large stone bowl held aloft by lions. The bowl is filled with blood, and in it she sees – *that is, Columbus dreams her seeing* – a vision of her own.”⁴⁹ The narration of Columbus’s dream also describes actual events, as Isabella actually experiences the vision that that Columbus sees her having in his dream. As Columbus dreams of Isabella sending her heralds after him, he wakes to find those heralds asking him to return, saying “[Isabella] saw a vision, and it scared her. All her dreams are prophecies.”⁵⁰ At this point, Rushdie has introduced an irreducible element into the story, as the dream has ended, Columbus has awakened, and yet the effects of events that supposedly didn’t occur are still occurring in a world in which Columbus is awake and sane. This shift from realism to magic comes at the end of the story, as Isabella finally decides to allow Columbus to venture into the Unknown, and go to the West. But readers don’t know if Columbus is leaving his exile to go to America, or to consummate his relationship with Isabella (or both—Columbus’s statement, “Yes, I’ll come,” is fairly ambiguous). Aligning Columbus’s decision with the stylistic change serves to imbue America with fantasy, as it is in this world of magic, not of realism—a world in which Columbus says words he does not mean, and a world in which Columbus will go West.

Science (fictions)

⁴⁹ Ibid, 116.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 118.

America, and the West as a whole, retains its influential position in “The Free Radio” and “Chekov and Zulu,” as Rushdie uses examples of technology and science fiction to serve as symbols of Western values’ influence in the East. In both of these stories, the elements that are central to the characterizations of the protagonists are unreal. The radio in “The Free Radio” is a figment of Ramani’s optimism, and though Chekov and Zulu are obsessed with *Star Trek*, neither of them have actually seen the show. This idea about the powers of fiction, which is evident throughout *East, West*, is critical to these stories, as the characters’ beliefs in the unreal coincide with real-life consequences. Rushdie demonstrates that just as he uses both magical and realist elements in *East, West*, the merging of fact and fiction is also emblematic of the status of the relationship between East and West. These characters’ perceptions of Western influence differ dramatically from the reality of the West’s intentions, a difference that can be seen in the contrast between Ramani’s naivety and the calculating nature of the Indian government and in the transformation of culture in its migration from West to East in “Chekov and Zulu,”

“Chekov and Zulu,” revolves around seemingly innocent *Star Trek* fandom, as the story follows two Indian men who work for the Indian Government’s intelligence division in London. The two men are opposites—Zulu is a Sikh, a “shy, burly giant,” while Chekov, who is

“small, slim, [and] dapper”⁵¹ is most likely a Muslim (while never overtly stated, it is a likely attribute, given the oppositional positions held by Chekov and Zulu and the conflict between Sikhs and Muslims that serves as an underlying aspect of this story). While the plotline, which is told through flashbacks, revolves around the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi, stylistically, the story borrows the language and terminology of the *Star Trek* series. But just as Ramani’s radio doesn’t exist, Chekov and Zulu’s connection to *Star Trek* is false as well, as Chekov recounts his childhood with Zulu in India, ““We never saw one episode of the TV series...The whole thing was just a legend wafting its way from the US to the UK to our lovely hill-station of Dehra Dun. After a while we got a couple of cheap paperback novelizations...”⁵² Rushdie demonstrates the extent to which popular culture can become transformed in the process of its move from West to East, but with this story, he also shows that this process can occur in the reverse as well.

Just as Rushdie manipulates *Hamlet* and “The Wizard of Oz” in the “West” section of the text, he depicts the evolution of another classic aspect Western culture in this story, as Chekov and Zulu adapt the television show situationally and linguistically. In terms of language, Rushdie blends *Star Trek* terminology with dialectal speech, manipulating the West’s phrases. Zulu’s name serves as an example. The character in *Star Trek* is actually named “Sulu,” but the characters misunderstand the

⁵¹ Ibid, 154.

⁵² Ibid, 165.

pronunciation, and Sulu becomes Zulu, reinforcing the pair's connection to the third world. The blending of languages is seen throughout Chekov and Zulu's interactions, as Punjabi, "Hinglish" and Star-Trek terminology blend together.⁵³ Elements of the characters' dialogue are nearly unintelligible as they converse, saying:

“‘What-ho, Zools! Years, yaar, years,’ Chekov said...
 ‘Hullo, ji,’ Zulu greeted him cautiously. ‘So then it is OK
 to utilize the olds modes of address?’
 ‘Utilise away! Wouldn’t hear of anything else,’ Chekov
 said... ‘Spirit of the *Enterprise* and all that jazz.’”⁵⁴

The blending of varying forms of language occurs here to such an extent that the conversation feels foreign to the readers, even as the characters reference *Star Trek*. Instead of the first world influencing the third world, this time, the roles are reversed.

This role reversal is also evident as Rushdie uses allusions to *Star Trek* to describe the fallout of the assassination of Indira Gandhi, as Zulu goes undercover to investigate Sikh assassins. This moment in the plot is revealed in the form of a memo to James T. Kirk, commanding officer of the *Enterprise*, the ship that is the focus of the television series. This memo signifies a complete immersion into the *Star Trek* fantasy, as the person who is represented by Kirk is never revealed—the readers know only that it must be some sort of leader, ranked higher than Chekov. The

⁵³ Gonzalez, Madelena, “Fiction After the Fatwa,” 88.

⁵⁴ Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 165.

memo continues this fantasy, as it reads, “To send a Federation employee of Klingon origin into a Klingon cell to spy is the crudest form of loyalty test...Unless [the grievances and aspirations of the Klingon people] are dealt with fair and square there cannot be a lasting peace.”⁵⁵ Representing the Sikh population with Klingons, and referring to Zulu’s status as a Sikh government employee in those terms, this memo reflects a moment of overt hybridity in the text, as Rushdie conflates not just two cultures, but two incredibly important aspects of those cultures, elements which are significant in vastly different ways—one in terms of politics and ethnic relations, the other in terms of popular culture and entertainment—but major cultural markers nonetheless.

The fusion of these two separate elements reveals a shared moral ideal, however, as Chekov’s plea for a different approach demonstrates. While in “The Free Radio,” Ramani’s unwavering belief is a sign of naivety that eventually leads to his sterilization, the influence of Western culture in this story is far less negative. Used as an escapist fantasy, *Star Trek* helps Chekov and Zulu face dangerous and stressful situations, and while the role of the government and the West is an intrusion in the idyllic village life in “The Free Radio,” in this story West and East merge, as Chekov and Zulu embrace *Star Trek* and mold it to fit their own lives and cultures. “Chekov and Zulu” serves as a clear refutation of Barber’s theory of globalization as a homogenizing force, as Rushdie shows these characters adapting and changing the elements of Western culture to

⁵⁵ Ibid, 160.

which they are exposed, an example of the extent to which globalization does not necessarily have to condense cultures into one capitalist community, but instead can bring about the manipulation and appropriation of cultural norms.

A story that addresses manipulation of a different sort, “The Free Radio” discusses Indira Gandhi’s presence and the collision of not two cultures but of government and citizen. The story relies on the contrast of characters just as heavily as “Chekov and Zulu,” as Ramani’s wholehearted belief in his radio is portrayed in a manner that contributes to his characterization as a young, attractive rickshaw driver who is naïve but likeable, a portrayal that serves as a foil to the portrayal of the Indian government. The story is set during the infamous Indian Emergency. Members of the Youth Movement, a deceptively-named group that actually serves as an arm of the government, grow close with Ramani, as they “flattered him with dreams...so now Ramani’s head became filled with these movie dreams, because there was nothing else inside to take up any space.”⁵⁶ Again, the power of fiction comes into play, in terms of both Ramani’s belief in the Youth Movement’s falsities, and with the reference to the cinema, as Ramani’s impressionable nature is juxtaposed against the manipulative powers of the government. Ramani is promised a “highly special and personalized gift from the Central Government in Delhi itself”—a “brand-new, first class, battery operated transistor radio.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid, 22

⁵⁷ Ibid, 25.

Rushdie ensures that his readers understand how fictitious this is, as he hyperbolizes the description of the gift. This image is contrasted with foreboding references to the “big white caravan” brought in by the local health officer, and into which “every night men were taken...for a while and things were done to them.”⁵⁸ It’s clear that these men are being sterilized, but Rushdie’s elusive writing contributes to the narrator’s anxiety about this van, and make it clear that while Ramani is thus far undamaged and whole, this cannot last.

Ramani continues to believe in the radio (though the charade now takes more effort on his part), and this endearing but dangerous belief is described by the narrator, who says “When I saw him now, there was a new thing on his face, a strained thing, as if he were having to make a phenomenal effort.”⁵⁹ This effort is eventually mitigated, when Ramani finally consents to sterilization and afterwards is thrown out of the white caravan, his hand no longer holding up his imaginary radio. But Rushdie shows that there is no end to his fantasies, as Ramani soon leaves for Bombay to become a film star. Instead of addressing reality, Ramani engages in a continuous postponement of truth. The narrator, despite his affection for the young man, disagrees with Ramani’s decisions, in an opposition that is critical to the story’s portrayal of the ideological opposition between old and new. The narrator, whose “ideas are wrinkled

⁵⁸ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

with age,”⁶⁰ represents the values of Old India, while Ramani, whose youth and innocence is a critical aspect of his character, reflects the younger generations in India, who are far more accepting of Western science and technology.⁶¹ Since this conflict is framed in terms of advancing technology and contemporary political turmoil, readers are reminded of the current stakes in the conflict between Ramani’s generation and the narrator’s. Ramani’s interest in the cinema, and his consumption of “no-questions-asked alcohol”⁶² serve as examples of his more youthful interests, and the narrator’s choice of words in describing said alcohol reveals his more antiquated stance. The spatial positioning of the narrator and Ramani is also representative of their symbolic functions, as the narrator takes on an observational role, remaining on the street with the banyan tree in view. His narrative is limited to firsthand reportage of what he sees, and the recounting of what others tell him (he does not, for example, attend Ramani’s wedding and depends on others’ accounts to learn about the event, and he interacts with characters only when they come onto the street where he is located). In contrast, Ramani is constantly on the move, usually on his rickshaw, and not only does he come in and out of the town, but he eventually moves much farther, when he leaves for

⁶⁰ Ibid, 30.

⁶¹ This relationship between the narrator and Ramani serves a similar purpose to characters in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. In this book, which follows India’s violent transformation from a colonial space to a postcolonial state, the characters of Aadam, a young man who has recently returned to Kashmir after studying medicine in Germany, and Tai, an old boatman from Kashmir find themselves in conflict after many years of friendship. As in “The Free Radio,” the source of conflict between the young Aadam and old Tai stems from Aadam’s acceptance of the values from Abroad, which Tai views as a betrayal.

⁶² Salman, Rushdie, *East, West*, 22.

Bombay. This juxtaposition of the narrator's stasis with Ramani's more migratory lifestyle is representative of the narrator's resistance to change and Ramani's acceptance of the West—a contrast that is encapsulated by the titular free radio.

Chapter 2: Radio as an Object of Force and Consent in *Midnight's Children* and “The Free Radio”

“*Yé Akashvani hai*,” Ramani announces to the streets as he mimics radio broadcasts for his local listeners' pleasure.⁶³ Saleem Sinai, *Midnight's Children's* protagonist, hears the same phrase as he tells his story with only a cheap transistor radio for company.⁶⁴ The expression, which translates to “Here is the voice from the sky,” serves as the tagline for the nationwide All India Radio.⁶⁵ A fitting a slogan for the radio station, *Yé Akashvani hai* similarly exemplifies the role of the radio in both of these texts. “The Free Radio” explores the technology of the radio as a device of governmental coercion, a force which contributes to the establishment of the country's new post-independent government as a source of unrivaled authority. The idea of “the voice from the sky,” an almost god-like source of information and authority, is a position which the government and Indira Gandhi strive to emulate in both “The Free Radio” and *Midnight's Children*. This voice from the sky is heard by all,

⁶³ Rushdie, Salman, “The Free Radio,” 27

⁶⁴ Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight's Children*, 190

⁶⁵ “Samples from Domestic Broadcasting Survey 14.”

just as the radio in India became an especially useful device as a result of its ubiquity in even the most rural areas. This same sense of an all-knowing being is apparent in *Midnight's Children*, as the telepathic Saleem uses his abilities to inhabit the minds of Indians across the nation, witnessing the vast range of experience and opinion among a technically united country firsthand. In both texts, the radio acts as an agent of authority and information that simultaneously propagates and denies the force of nationalism, as Rushdie explores the role of this technology in a newly independent nation at a moment of tumult.

Radio and National Identity

The radio's ability to transform from an instrument of colonialism to a tool of national independence is central to Rushdie's portrayal of the role of the radio in post-independence India, which he examines in the short story "The Free Radio" and his novel *Midnight's Children*. In both Rushdie portrays the radio as a mode of communication whose content can be manipulated by authority and absorbed and mimicked by listeners. Although little scholarly attention has been devoted to this element of Rushdie's work, this concept of the radio as an agent of colonialism and nationalism is not limited to India. Rather, the radio has functioned as a device of rebellion and submission in both colonizing and colonized nations. The evolving nature of the radio's purpose in Algeria and France reflects its unstable position in India which Rushdie portrays in both texts.

In “This is the Voice of Algeria” Franz Fanon discusses the significance of this same phenomenon. During the French regime in Algeria, the distribution of radio listeners paralleled that of the radio’s audience in colonial India. Before 1945, 95 percent of the radio audience in Algeria was composed of Europeans, with the remaining 5 percent composed largely of the “developed bourgeoisie” among the Algerians.⁶⁶ The radio acted as an assurance of civilization and French identity to the Europeans living in the “backward” society of Algeria. In rural colonial settlements run by the French government and located in Algeria’s hinterland, Radio-Alger was, according to the settler’s expression, “‘the only way to still feel like a civilized man.’ On the farms, the radio remind[ed] the settler of the reality of colonial power and, by its very existence, dispense[d] safety, serenity...Radio-Alger, for the settler, [was] a daily invitation not to ‘go native,’ not to forget the rightfulness of his culture.”⁶⁷ The radio in colonial Algeria operated with a purpose similar to that of the Indian Broadcasting Company, serving as a source of national identity for the colonizers away from their homeland, and a reminder of the importance of the colonial project. Soon, however, the radio’s role in Algeria became far more revolutionary. In the 1950s, Algerians began to rebel against the French presence in Algeria and in 1956 the announcement of a new station, The Voice of Free Algeria, which supplied broadcasts from the perspective of Algerian rebels brought forth

⁶⁶ Fanon, Franz, *This is the Voice of Algeria*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

an enormous rise in the popularity of radio among Algerians. Fanon explains,

Since 1956 the purchase of a radio in Algeria has meant, not the adoption of a modern technique for getting news, but the obtaining of access to the only means of entering into communication with the Revolution, of living with it....Listening to the Voice of Fighting Algeria was motivated not just by eagerness to hear the news, but more particularly by the inner need to be at one with the nation in its struggle, to recapture and to assume the new national formulation, to listen to and to repeat the grandeur of the epic being accomplished up there among the rocks and on the djebels.⁶⁸

The history of the radio in Algeria stands as the most extreme, exciting example of the radio as an object of national unification, as it transformed from an instrument of colonialism to a tpp; of revolution. The radio in India, rather, remained under the influence of the government, as control was transferred from the colonial government to the Indian administration, prohibiting the development of an independent station not affiliated with governmental forces, and preventing the radio from serving as a conduit for Indians dissatisfied by their country's new leadership. The consequences of this authoritarian influence on the radio will become apparent later in this chapter, as the radio's role in the coerced sterilizations of the Indian population is discussed.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

The relationship between the radio and national identity in postcolonial nations, or nations in general, has not generated much scholarly attention. While the role that print media and television play in the development and preservation of national and cultural identity has been the object of an extensive amount of scholarship, the radio is often overlooked in these discussions. A few scholars have recently published works on the topic, including Joelle Neulander, who examines the role of radio programming in encouraging socially conservative family values in France and the portrayal of colonial nations which radio shows offered to France's audiences. Radio plays and songs broadcast in France which depicted the exotic space of colonized nations focused "not on satisfaction and happiness outside France, but rather on the danger that lurked beyond the national borders."⁶⁹ Radio programming ensured that France's colonial territories seemed primitive and frightening, suggesting not just superiority of the French lifestyle but also the altruism of the French government's actions, as they risked their citizens' lives in their attempts to assist their colonial subjects. After all, Neulander notes, "colonial subjects did not reflect back the image of bourgeois patriarchal morality that radio producers saw as their ideal."⁷⁰ The dissatisfaction and resistance expressed by France's colonial subjects, such as the djebel forces in Algeria, did not align with the illustration of the French colonial project that the radio programs portrayed. While radio programming

⁶⁹ Neulander, Joelle, *Programming National Identity*, 160.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 160.

needed to support France's African empire, which included French Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Ivory Coast, the portrayal of colonized nations generally served as a reminder of the superiority and safety of the French lifestyle which radio shows encouraged. As Neulander states, "The empire was a necessary evil, to be maintained at a distance, then exploited by radio playwrights and composers and enjoyed by French families as an evening's exotic entertainment."⁷¹ The radio broadcasted a specific position on colonization while also ensuring that listeners would be exposed to the cultural practices which were viewed as ideal at the time, portraying the dangers of avoiding marriage while promoting stable patriarchal family structures that placed women in the home and men in the workplace.

The radio's role in India echoes elements of its position in Algeria and France, as a device of simultaneity and as an object available for manipulation. Both "The Free Radio" and *Midnight's Children* address this element of Indian culture, as the texts' protagonists engage with All-India Radio and create their own versions of radios. Rushdie portrays Saleem and Ramani's unwavering belief in their radios' efficacy as he aligns their faith in the radio with their belief in the national project (Saleem stakes his ambitions in his personal parliament and Ramani accepts the government's promises without question). With the introduction of the powerful, destructive Widow, Rushdie also demonstrates that the radio's serves as a device which can not only

⁷¹ Ibid, 184.

propagate nationalism but also meet the coercive needs of the state. In this section of my project, I examine the intertextual relationship between Rushdie's novel and short story, which manifests largely in the role of the radio in both *Midnight's Children* and "The Free Radio," as Rushdie fictionalizes the concept of radio as an instrument which encourages and disseminates a shared national identity. The manipulation of this device at the hands of the government is presented in both texts, located in the moments of the Indian Emergency. Rushdie pits the individual protagonist who embodies elements of the nation against Indira Gandhi, a character who appears as a hyperbolized villain of mythical proportions, but who also, like Saleem, embodies the nation. In both texts, the characters' naïve optimism and eventual failure of their imagined radios is contrasted with the violent power of Indira Gandhi. The radios in both stories reflect their position as objects which are central to the development of national identity, but their cultural influence is mitigated and manipulated by the political machinations of the postcolonial state.

Both texts display the ongoing tension that exists between the use of the radio by the Indian audience versus the Indian authorities. The radio serves as an object of nationhood, encouraging in its listeners a sense of simultaneity. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* writes about the newspaper as an object of national identity and simultaneity, writing that as people across a nation consume the morning and evening editions of the newspaper, "Each communicant is simultaneously aware that the

ceremony he performs is being replicated by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”⁷² The radio takes on the same role as the newspaper, uniting its listeners across the nation. The radio interpellates its audience as members of independent India, just as *The Voice of Free Algeria* helped to transform the Algerian public into participants of the colonial rebellion. In Rushdie’s texts, however, Saleem and Ramani represent opposing sides of the process of interpellation. Saleem, who literally becomes his own radio hails the members of his Conference to participate in his nationalistic ambitions. Ramani, on the other hand, represents those who are successfully interpellated by the radio. Both Saleem and Ramani ultimately participate in the government’s sterilization scheme, but Ramani does so willingly, effectively wooed by the radio, while Saleem is taken by force. The divergent nature of these protagonists’ fates reflects the duality of the radio, one which embodies the Gramscian idea of the dual perspective of force and consent. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci discusses Machiavelli’s centaur as a symbol of the revolutionary’s party need to hold together in a dialectical unity the two levels “of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy.”⁷³ The radio in India is a device which unifies these binaries, as is seen in Rushdie’s depictions of the radio’s role in manipulating Indian citizens into willing participants in

⁷² Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities*, 35.

⁷³ Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 315.

governmental projects like sterilization, while also inciting violence and trauma. Saleem and Ramani reflect this opposition—Saleem is ultimately defeated by force, authority, violence, agitation and tactics, while Ramani’s experience can be defined by the opposing terms.

The Development of All India Radio

The history of All India Radio is one which reflects the government’s ongoing interest in radio broadcasts as a tool with which they could inform and influence the Indian population. Radio broadcasting originated in the 1920s when India was still under England’s colonial regime. Lord Irwin, the viceroy of India began a commercial broadcasting service in 1927, after negotiating an agreement with two independent radio clubs in Bombay and Calcutta (now Mumbai and Kolkata). Then called the Indian Broadcasting Company, the station’s broadcasts were intended for Europeans in India and the “thin upper crust of English-speaking Indians.”⁷⁴ In 1930 the colonial government took control of the service at the insistence of license holders and equipment dealers who complained of mismanagement under Irwin. By 1932, as the prospect of independence loomed, the English government decided to use broadcasts to reduce public support of Indian freedom fighters. In 1936 the company was renamed All India Radio, and as Asha Kasbekar states, “Its objective was clear: to inform, educate, and entertain the masses in a manner that the authorities thought appropriate.”⁷⁵ All India Radio installed a network

⁷⁴ Kasbekar, Asha, *Pop Culture India*, 130.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 132.

of six broadcasting centers across India, and from its very beginnings the radio served as an instrument which the government used to disseminate the information they chose, as news bulletins and even styles of music which were broadcast was determined by government officials. The colonial authority's implementation of the radio as a source of control and influence would later be imitated by the administration under Indira Gandhi during the Emergency. The independent government which the colonial regime attempted to obstruct partly via the radio ultimately used the same tools as their former oppressors in their own acts of subjugation. The propagandistic purposes of the radio continued during World War II as All India Radio increased their centralized news bulletins, which were broadcast daily in twenty seven Indian languages.

When India gained independence the control of All India Radio transferred to the new Indian government (the transfer of power was broadcast live on radio, including Nehru's famous "tryst with destiny" speech). With independence came an increased listening audience, as Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel placed the states' radio stations under government control and drew up a plan to vastly extend the radio's coverage to a wider variety of linguistic and geographic regions.⁷⁶ By 1950, 25 broadcasting centers across India reached 21 percent of the population, and debates over the nature of content began to grow heated. By this time, as Priyamvada Gopal notes, the technologies of the radio and the cinema had quickly become ingrained in the public sphere. Like

⁷⁶ Ibid, 132.

Anderson's newspaper, the radio became a ritual for the Indian public, and as the radio's popularity expanded so did its influence, making the technology increasingly important to the government as a mode of communication and control. But despite the government's interest in broadcasting classical music and "rescu[ing] the general public from the vulgarities of Indian film songs,"⁷⁷ the listening public managed to circumvent the government's discontinuation of the broadcast of film music by listening to Radio Ceylon, a station based in what is now Sri Lanka. After a survey in 1957 revealed that nine out of ten stations were tuned to Radio Ceylon, with each tenth set being broken, the Indian government relented in the hopes that listeners would tune to the broadcasts whose contents they could control when necessary. Such necessity arose during the government's population control campaign (to be discussed at length later in this paper), and to an even greater extent during the Emergency, during which the government "blatantly used the radio to promote its agenda. There was a clamp down on all dissenting voices."⁷⁸ During this period, the minister for Information and Broadcasting, V.C. Shukla informed station directors that All India Radio existed to "made people 'understand' government policies....All India Radio was soon dubbed 'All Indi(r)a Radio' by the listening public,"⁷⁹ a term which echoes the slogan which Saleem describes Gandhi adopting

⁷⁷ Kasbekar, Asha, *Pop Culture India*, 133.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 134.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

during the Emergency, that “India is Indira and Indira is India.”⁸⁰ And yet, despite the awareness of the government’s influence, the radio continued to attract listeners and effectively disseminate the information that authorities wanted to be heard (i.e. the advertisements for birth control methods). Radio and authority become one, and “All Indi(r)a Radio” serves as a technological example of the Machiavellian centaur as Gramsci describes it.

Radios, Imagined and Real

The radios in *Midnight’s Children* and “The Free Radio” act as modes of imitation and production, as both texts’ protagonists become broadcasters in their own right. In *Midnight’s Children*, the 1,001 children born during the first hour of India’s independence are endowed with miraculous powers. Saleem is granted telepathic abilities and as he initially begins to understand and develop his telepathy, he becomes “a sort of radio,”⁸¹ beginning his transformation from one who is interpellated to one who interpellates. His initial listening experience mirrors that of a radio listener, as he observes the thoughts of celebrities and politicians, engaging in the consumption of popular culture which the radio encourages for people across India, creating a shared knowledge base and sense of national identity. But as Saleem soon realizes that his powers extend beyond that of the average radio audience, it becomes apparent that his abilities allow him to obtain a degree of shared

⁸⁰ Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children*, 483.

⁸¹ Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children*, 189.

experience not possible within the realm of realism as he learns the most intimate details of individuals across the nation, and eventually allows others to communicate at a similar level of intimacy.

Saleem can not only listen to the many voices of the Indian population, but also embody their experiences, seeing, hearing, and feeling what people all over India are doing. Saleem recounts, “At one time I was a landlord in Uttar Pradesh, my belly rolling over my pajama-cord as I ordered serfs to set my surplus grain on fire...at another moment I was starving to death in Orissa, where there was a food shortage as usual.”⁸² As the allegorical embodiment of the nation, Saleem attains the ability to become every person who makes up its population. His experience with telepathy serves as an extreme illustration of the capabilities of the radio as an object of national identity. As Saleem listens to the thoughts of India’s “teeming millions, masses and classes alike,” whose voices “babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the southern slurrings of Tamil...language faded away and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words.”⁸³ Even as language riots break out and erupt into violence, Saleem can surpass India’s divisive language barriers, accessing the experiences of a culturally diverse population and uniting them as only he can, within himself. While Saleem’s telepathic radio allows him to understand and appreciate India in its fragmented, complex entirety, the

⁸² Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children*, 198.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 192.

miraculous nature of this ability suggests the intangibility of such a complete, easy unification in real life. The limitations of this technology's ability to unify are apparent in *Midnight's Children*, as the portrayal of the radio complicates Anderson's discussion of the newspaper as a device of simultaneity. In India, it seems that the radio most dramatically enacts change in the hands of authority, rather than in the mind of a single citizen.

Saleem's inability to effectively "broadcast" his (admittedly vague) agenda becomes increasingly apparent with the failure of his Midnight's Children Conference. As he grows aware of the presence of other children with whom he can communicate telepathically, he senses "The unconscious beacons of the children of midnight, signaling nothing more than their existence, transmitting simply: 'I.' From far to the North, 'I.' And the South East West: 'I.' 'I.' 'And I.'"⁸⁴ From the earliest origins of the Midnight's Children's Conference, Saleem imagines the children as a unified, single entity. His optimism is soon undermined by the reality of the Conference, which is emblematic of India as a whole in its chaotic expression of widely varying political views stemming from vastly different socioeconomic and cultural situations. Saleem can "act as a sort of national network, so that by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a forum in which they could talk to each other through me."⁸⁵ The children assemble in the "lok sabha or parliament" of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 259.

Saleem's mind each night, as the Midnight's Children's Conference is initiated. Saleem's nationalistic aims have grown more ambitious as his abilities have expanded, allowing him to abandon the passive act of listening and watching, and take on a more active role as host and leader of the Conference. Saleem has lofty visions for the conference, which he falteringly explains to Shiva, saying "I had in mind something more like a, you know, sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression."⁸⁶ However, he is soon disappointed by the conference's disorganized, chaotic state. Saleem explains that, "There were declarations of women's rights and pleas for the improvement of the lot of untouchables; landless children dreamed of land and tribals from the hills, of Jeeps; and there were, also, fantasies of power."⁸⁷ Saleem uses his telepathy in the hopes of discovering a national entity, but fails to discover or create any sense of unity. However, while he can't mediate agreement among his fellow midnight's children, he is able to create a sense of simultaneity, allowing children across the nation to experience the same situation at the same time despite their physical distance and divergent lives.

This simultaneity is apparent in both *Midnight's Children* and "The Free Radio," as both protagonists produce, in their own way, a mode of communication and expression with their imagined radios. In both texts the radio, real and imagined, acts as a unifying instrument, one which

⁸⁶ Ibid., 252.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 261.

addresses a nation in its entirety (India is located in one time zone), as a single voice speaks to its audience “from the sky,” ensuring that people across India are engaged in a shared activity, receiving the same information and hearing the same music. Ramani in “The Free Radio” reflects the popularity of radio broadcasts as he excitedly discusses the radio promised to him by the government; a “highly special and personalized gift from the Central Government in Delhi itself... a “brand-new, first class, battery operated transistor radio.”⁸⁸ As he awaits his new radio, which unbeknownst to him is a bribe offered by the government in exchange for undergoing voluntary sterilization, Ramani enthusiastically performs radio broadcasts as he drives his rickshaw around the village, announcing:

‘This is All-India Radio. Here is the news. A Government spokesman today announced that Ramani rickshaw-wallah’s radio was on its way and would be delivered at any moment. And now some playback music.’ After which he would sing songs by Asha Bhonsle or Lata Mangeshkar in a high, ridiculous falsetto.⁸⁹

Through his mimetic engagement with the broadcasts, Ramani occupies, ironically, the position which Macaulay famously described in his 1835 *Minute on Education*, when he stated, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern...[We may] render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying

⁸⁸ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

knowledge to the great mass of the population.”⁹⁰ The radio, and in this case Ramani, takes on that role, acting as a vehicle of knowledge for Indira’s administration, as Ramani remains simultaneously occupies his position as an Indian citizen in a rural village while also serving as a conduit for Indian propaganda about sterilization, serving as one of Macaulay’s “interpreters.”

Just as Saleem becomes a “national network,” a role which he takes on in the fabulous, fantastic realm that Rushdie’s creates in *Midnight’s Children*, Ramani takes on the role of the radio, sharing All-India Radio’s broadcasts with his village in a story which remains rooted in historical reality, one which lacks the magical realism of *Midnight’s Children*. As a rickshaw driver, he is constantly in motion, and thus his performance, rather than originating in a single location and travelling to a large audience simultaneously, reaches his listeners at different times, as the radio that is Ramani travels by rickshaw rather than through radio waves. The image of the radio as an instrument of simultaneity is further complicated in the story, as unlike *Midnight’s Children*, in which Rushdie explicitly addresses the complication of India’s varying languages, in “The Free Radio,” the language which the people in Ramani’s village speak is never identified and their access to radio broadcasts in a language which they understand is taken for granted. While Saleem’s telepathic radio surpasses the issue of translation by avoiding actual language altogether,

⁹⁰ Babington Macaulay, Thomas, “Minute on Education.”

Ramani's radio operates in a more realistic setting, one in which the issue of translation is not avoided by Rushdie's devices of magical realism.

All India Radio developed its External Services Division shortly after the nation gained independence, in 1948. As part of the government's program to expand radio's reach to as many Indians as possible, the availability of broadcasts in multiple languages became the responsibility of the External Services Division. Though All India Radio continued adding broadcasts in more languages through the nineties, by the time of the Indian Emergency, broadcasts were available in Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Urdu.⁹¹ While Gandhi and her administration utilized the radio as a tool for national communication, the radio broadcasts occurring throughout India were not completely unified. While the language that Ramani uses in his broadcasts is unknown, the variance in the language of radio broadcasts across India complicate the status of the radio as an object of unification, though the similarity in content (i.e. the centralized news bulletins mentioned earlier) mitigates to an extent this difference.

The Threat of the Widow

Even after a year has passed, Ramani still believes in his promised radio and continues to pretend to carry it through the streets on his rickshaw, though the charade now takes more effort on his part. The narrator explains, "When I saw him now, there was a new thing on his face, a strained thing, as if he were having to make a phenomenal

⁹¹ *All India Radio.*

effort...as if all of the energy of his young body was being poured into the fictional space between his ear and his hand.”⁹² This fictional space, in both “The Free Radio” and *Midnight’s Children* gives Ramani and Saleem the freedom to optimistically create modes of expression and communication; Ramani with his unwavering belief in his forthcoming radio and the resolute continuation of his own broadcasts, and Saleem with his miraculous telepathy which he uses to channel his nationalistic ambitions through the Midnight’s Children’s Conference. But these fictional spaces are destroyed by the primary menace of both stories: Indira Gandhi, the Widow, who not only ends both characters’ ambitions, but also eliminates their ability to reproduce, fulfilling for Ramani as well as Saleem the prophecy put forth by Ramram the seer in *Midnight’s Children*: “he will have sons without having sons.”⁹³

The element of Gandhi’s politics which Rushdie addresses in “The Free Radio,” and which is a central element to her characterization in *Midnight’s Children* is her role in India’s methods of population control. When Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1966, elected by Parliament to replace Prime Minister Lal Badahur Shastri after he died of a heart attack, she immediately expressed an interest in family planning and population control to combat the problem of famine in India.⁹⁴ Historian Matthew Connelly notes that, “As information minister, [Gandhi] had pressed for a plan to distribute hundreds of thousands of radios across rural India to

⁹² Ibid., 28.

⁹³ Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children*, 94.

⁹⁴ The last major famine, at this point, had occurred in 1943 and left three million dead.

transmit family planning information. And Gandhi...was also among those who had been pressuring Nayar [India's Union Health Minister] to pay women to accept IUD insertion."⁹⁵ Despite offering incentives to the public, by 1967 India was falling behind in its attempts at population control, causing public health officials to "devise a scheme that would come to signify everything wrong with population control in India."⁹⁶ Instead of offering higher incentive payments for sterilization, the Ministry began giving people transistor radios, as they thought "It would make manifest what had only been a promise: the idea that family planning, by itself, could make people modern."⁹⁷ The radio also served as an effective mouthpiece for the government, allowing propaganda about the benefits of birth control to be shared with rural communities which had posed a challenge to governmental forces trying to disseminate information to the Indian population.

With increasing quotas and a growing disregard for the public's well-being, the sterilization program quickly disintegrated into a coercive machine. Promises of higher incentives, free supplies, and land grants were made and broken, vasectomies were performed on the elderly, disabled, and mentally ill, and as physicians operated without proper training, more than half of the population who received vasectomies or

⁹⁵ Connelly, Matthew. *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population*. 224.

⁹⁶ Ibid 228

⁹⁷ Ibid 228

IUD insertions complained of postoperative complications.⁹⁸ The problems which plagued the family planning program only grew worse during the Emergency (1975-1977).⁹⁹ Ultimately, the campaign exceeded its target of 7.5 million vasectomies, but the program's incompetency and coercion left contributed to the Indian population's disdain for both Indira Gandhi and the idea of population control as a governmental responsibility. As Robert Hardgrave notes in *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*:

Allegations of compulsory sterilization because a major issue in Indira Gandhi's 1977 electoral defeat. The fear generated by the vasectomy campaign...posed a serious setback for birth control in India...Since 1977 no political party has called for control of population nor has any election manifesto mentioned it.¹⁰⁰

Rushdie sets the climactic final scenes of *Midnight's Children* during the Indian Emergency, and uses the government's campaign of coerced vasectomies as the premise of "The Free Radio." In both stories, Gandhi, represented as the Widow,¹⁰¹ appears as the villainous, controlling force behind the program. "The Free Radio," with its title referencing the government's use of transistor radios as incentives for consenting to a vasectomy, contrasts the naivety of Ramani with the Widow's

⁹⁸ Ibid 227

¹⁰⁰ Hardgrave, Robert. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*, 5-6.

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting that in *Midnight's Children*, "the Widow" is always capitalized while in "The Free Radio," she is just "the widow," or "the thief's widow." She is explicitly identified as Indira Gandhi in *Midnight's Children* but not "The Free Radio," and in the short story she remains merely a character rather than a historical figure. To avoid confusion, I am consistently capitalizing her name throughout this paper.

machinations. The narrator begins the story, saying, “We all knew nothing good would happen to him while the thief’s widow had her claws dug into his flesh, but the boy was an innocent, a real donkey’s child, you can’t teach such people.”¹⁰² Immediately Ramani becomes more than a single character, and instead stands as the embodiment of the innocent, the people who can’t be taught, but who can be manipulated. A story about coercion and manipulation, “The Free Radio” uses Ramani as a symbol of all the hapless victims so easily wooed by the incentive of a free radio and the reassurances that, as Ramani explains, sterilization “does not stop love-making or anything...it stops babies only, and my woman did not want children anymore so now all is hundred per cent OK. Also it is in the national interest...and soon the free radio will arrive.”¹⁰³ Just as Ramani mimics the broadcast of All-India Radio, he repeats the information fed to him about sterilization, fulfilling Gandhi’s proposition that radios be distributed to rural areas in order to transmit family planning information. His understanding of the national interest which he describes reflects the interest only of the government rather than the population, as the influence of the Widow and the members of the Youth Movement have effectively altered his perception of the nation in favor of the authority in place. He engages with the government’s strategy voluntarily, fulfilling the government’s coercive needs without resistance or knowledge of his

¹⁰² Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 19.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 26.

actions' significance, as he falls under the influence of not just the promise of the radio, but of the Widow herself.

“The Free Radio” portrays the evolving relationship between the Widow and Ramani, as they meet and eventually marry. The union between the pair appears as a calculated move on the part of the Widow, readily accepted by the gullible Ramani. From the start, the narrator explains that she is the wrong woman for Ramani, ten years older than him and a mother to five children. The Widow meets Ramani when she buys a rickshaw ride from him, as the narrator describes,

It was an investment for her, because must-be she had decided already to put her hooks into Ramani. So they all poured into the rickshaw and he took her away, and with the five kiddies as well as the widow there was quite a weight...and I thought, careful, my son, or you will have this burden to pull for all of your life.¹⁰⁴

The warning of permanency is especially relevant in the context of the story's message about infertility. By allowing the Widow to “put her hooks” into him, Ramani moves closer to his eventual vasectomy, and Rushdie uses this moment to speak about the lifelong burden of infertility faced by the millions of men who agreed to vasectomies under India's sterilization campaigns. The blame here is directed squarely at Gandhi, as Rushdie uses this story as not only a warning against naïve belief in authority but also a critique of the coercive nature of the authority discussed. The manipulative nature of government and the Widow is

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 21.

apparent even in brief moments like this passage, in which the action is controlled entirely by the Widow, as she makes the decision to ride in the rickshaw and in doing so, pursue Ramani. In the act of pulling the rickshaw Ramani occupies an contradictory position, as he controls the cart with the Widow and her children as his passengers but at the same time remains under order of the Widow, working to receive money from her and driving her to wherever she chooses. His agency is superseded by that of the Widow, an element of their relationship which remains true throughout the story. The decisions Ramani makes, from choosing to be sterilized to travelling to Bombay all stem from the Widow's suggestions and desires, and he remains an object of manipulation, unaware and nonresistant.

Just as the radio reflects the dual perspective of force and consent, the Widow's contrasting relationships with Saleem and Ramani can be viewed in those terms as well, as Ramani willingly engages in marriage with her while Saleem grows up in fear of the Widow. Saleem encounters the Widow for only a brief period of the novel. She appears in his dreams as a child and plays a critical role in Book Three, as Saleem's life and India's political turmoil collide. While Saleem's encounters with the Widow are much briefer, her destructive abilities are just as potent. Both texts address the Widow in a similar manner, as Saleem and the elderly narrator in "The Free Radio" imbue their story with their opinions, narrating in a biased, personal style that reflects the strong animosity they

feel towards the Widow. In “The Free Radio” the narrator admits that despite her “rotten” mentality the Widow is attractive but in a “hard, vicious way.” Several times in the story he refers to her hands as “claws” or “hooks” describing them digging into Ramani’s flesh. With minimal information about her appearance besides these details provided by the narrator, the image created is one defined entirely by her predatory characteristics, one that is fitting given her destructive purpose in the story. A similar, though more dramatic image is created in *Midnight’s Children*, as Saleem’s first vision of the Widow comes to him in a fever-induced childhood dream:

The Widow’s arm is long as death its skin is green the
fingernails are long and sharp and black...the Widow’s arm
comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream
the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow’s arm is
hunting see the children run and scream.¹⁰⁵

The witch-like, green and black villainous figure parallels one of the most famous evil characters in cinema, the wicked witch of the East in *The Wizard of Oz*. A movie which Rushdie viewed as a young child (at the Metro Cub Club, as mentioned in an earlier footnote) and parodied in another short story in *East, West* (“At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers”), *The Wizard of Oz* makes its appearance in *Midnight’s Children* as an accident of the subconscious, according to Rushdie (The Widow is also described as “the witch” in “The Free Radio.”). In an essay he wrote about the film, he explains that he unknowingly infused the wicked witch imagery in Saleem’s dream without an awareness of their source. Rushdie writes that in “the stream-of-consciousness dream-sequence...the nightmare of Indira Gandhi is fused with the equally nightmarish figure of Margaret Hamilton [who played the wicked witch of the West in the film]: a coming-together of the Wicked Witches of the East and of the West.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Rushdie, Salman, *Midnight’s Children*, 238.

¹⁰⁶ Rushdie, Salman, *The Wizard of Oz*, 33.

The witch-like figure of the Widow brings a cinematic element to these stories already infused with characters and narrative styles rooted in the film industry, fusing entertainment, hyperbole, and history together as the stories present the violent sterilization regime that Gandhi and the Indian government enacted. The protagonists, their radios, and their interactions with the Widow form a relationship central to both texts and which ultimately serves to reflect the domination of force over consent as forms of authority in these stories.

Sterilization as a Force of Coercion and Destruction

In both texts, the governmental sterilization campaign is tied to not only the Widow's characterization as the primary force of evil, but also the destruction of Ramani's and Saleem's radios, and correspondingly, their contribution to the national project of India. In "The Free Radio," Ramani's violent encounter in the health officer's van brings about the end of his imaginative, optimistic belief in his radio. Alluded to earlier in the story in ambiguous terms, when the narrator described that "The local health officer had brought a big white caravan into the street...and every night men were taken into this van for a while and things were done to them,"¹⁰⁷ these mobile vasectomy camps which Rushdie portrays serve as an accurate representation of one of the government's methods that allowed their sterilization campaign to reach rural areas.¹⁰⁸ Just as radios transported the idea of vasectomies to Indian villages, these vans brought the instruments, physicians, and space needed to perform them. A year after his marriage to the Widow, one of these white caravans returns to the village and the narrator "knew there was nothing to be done, because Ram would certainly come to get his gift."¹⁰⁹ Radio and vasectomy are conflated here in the ambiguous description of the "gift," as Rushdie portrays the ease with which the transistor radio bribe functioned as a distraction from the severity and permanence of sterilization. Saleem, in *Midnight's Children* comments on the tactic, saying that the transistor radio "will never cease, in our part of the world, to symbolize impotence...ever since the notorious free-transistor sterilization bribe."¹¹⁰ And in "The Free Radio," the bribe works for Ramani just as the government imagined, as he enters the caravan confidently and without anxiety:

Ringing his bicycle-bell and imitating weather forecasts,
ear cupped as usual...Ram went into the caravan gaily,
waving at the arm-banded cronies After a short time there
were sounds of disagreement inside the caravan, and then
louder noises still, and finally the youths in armbands went

¹⁰⁷ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Hardgrave, Robert. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 28.

¹¹⁰ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*, 190.

in to see what was becoming, and soon after that Ram was frogmarched out by his drinking-chums, and his hair-grease was smudged on his face and there was blood coming from his mouth. His hand was no longer cupped by his ear.¹¹¹

The moments after Ramani's vasectomy reveal the loss of much of what has defined his character throughout the story. His "drinking-chums" physically restrain him, demonstrating their extent of their allegiance to the government, his attractive appearance is blemished with his hair-grease on his face and blood coming from his mouth, and most critically, "his hand was no longer cupped by his ear," as Ramani has given up his attempts to recreate radio broadcasts. With the loss of his reproductive abilities comes the loss of his willingness to imagine, and to engage in the government's dissemination of information. When force at last replaces consent in Ramani's story, the change in his character is dramatic, and his story comes to an end shortly after.

Ultimately, Ramani never receives the radio he had been promised, and he doesn't mimic broadcasts again, as he sells his rickshaw and leaves for Bombay shortly after the procedure. He receives a vasectomy to appease his wife and to please the government, though he doesn't seem to grasp the details of the procedure until it's already underway, as Rushdie pits the naivety of Ramani against the Widow's schemes and the government's coercive powers in his critique of India's sterilization campaign. Ramani's gullibility, despite the problems it causes him, is consistently portrayed in nostalgic, affectionate terms, as the narrator

¹¹¹ Rushdie, Salman, *East, West*, 31.

explains that “Ramani always had the rare quality of total belief in his dreams, and there were times when his faith in the imaginary radio almost took us in.”¹¹² There is a wistfulness to the narrator’s tone here, as he recounts a scene which he knows cannot be replicated. Ramani’s future is unknown to the reader, and although the story ends with the narrator’s recounting of confident letters from Ramani as he seeks success in Bombay, this upbeat portrayal of his future is tempered by the narrator’s closing reflection on “the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned the truth about his radio, and the huge made energy which he poured into the act of conjuring reality...”¹¹³ Ramani’s vaunted ability to “conjure reality,” to create, or procreate, has been eliminated by the Widow and the government, and the story ends not with a nod to Ramani’s future but with a reminder of all that he has lost.

While Ramani’s sterilization is an isolated incident of violence, in *Midnight’s Children*, Saleem’s vasectomy is one of multiple procedures occurring as the government sterilizes all of the midnight’s children. Rushdie portrays a scene of violence and chaos in the magician’s ghetto, as Sanjay Gandhi and military troops raze the magician’s ghetto, demolishing the buildings and dragging people “by the hair towards the waiting yawning vans” to perform sterilization procedures.¹¹⁴ It is amid this chaotic scene that Saleem is captured and locked in a palace in Benares, where he unwittingly reveals the location of the other children.

¹¹² Ibid, 27.

¹¹³ Ibid, 32.

¹¹⁴ Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight’s Children*, 494.

During his incarceration he communicates with the midnight's children, his optimism returning as he says, "Maybe we should form, I don't know, a new political party, yes, the Midnight Party, what chance do politics have against people who can multiply fishes and turn base metals into gold?"¹¹⁵ But Saleem's undying belief in the power of the Midnight's Children wanes at the hands of the government:

Test- and hysterectomized, the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves...but that was only a side-effect because they were truly extraordinary doctors, and they drained more than that: hope, too, was excised...for all those who had come to the palace of the wailing windows with their magical gifts intact, the awakening from anesthesia was cruel indeed.¹¹⁶

By taking away not just the midnight's children's powers, but also their belief in the possibility of change, the sterilization procedure not only prevents the children from reproducing, but also from resisting. The fervent belief in the power to create change which Saleem had earlier professed is eliminated as the government wields its power. The threat which the children pose to the government is apparent, as it is only the "extraordinary" doctors who are trusted with the task of disabling the children's powers; Saleem's confidence in the children's abilities is not entirely unfounded. The midnight's children were endowed with their powers because they were born as the country of India became an independent nation, and now, under the heavy-handed authority of the

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 502.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 505.

Widow during the Indian Emergency, independence, and all that it was expected to bring forth, no longer seems within the population's grasp. Just as Ramani in "The Free Radio" loses that "rare quality of total belief," the sterilization of the midnight's children ensures that the "one-thousand-and-one marvelous promises of a numinous midnight" are gone forever.¹¹⁷

Despite their vasectomies, both Saleem and Ramani both have children. Saleem's wife, Parvati gave birth to Aadam, whose biological father is Shiva, and Ramani becomes the father of the Widow's children when he marries her. Both men are linked to children sired by the stories' enemies, and in these texts where consumption and creation are constantly at play, these children defy both processes. Little is said about the children in "The Free Radio," who essentially serve as nameless burdens, but Aadam in *Midnight's Children* is a part of a second generation of magical children who Saleem imagines "would grow up far tougher than the first, not looking for their fate in prophecy or the stars, but forging it in the implacable furnaces of their wills."¹¹⁸ Aadam is the newest vehicle for Saleem's optimism, and while his future remains ambiguous, this new generation serves as a reminder that India's development as a nation will continue, as the Emergency ends and the Widow's reign collapses. While the stories both portray the violence of the government as a force more powerful than the coercive strategy employed by the radio, the long-term results of the government's actions complicate the idea that force triumphs

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 505.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 515.

over consent. The characters' stories remain inconclusive, as Ramani heads off to Bombay to become a part of the film-making machine and Saleem prepares for his impending death, but the state of the nation, at the very least, with the post-Emergency election and ensuing shake-up of power, seems promising. By the stories' ends, both Ramani and Saleem have lost their ability to procreate and their belief in their dreams of radios, but the promise and vision of a future for the Indian population, be it as trivial as Ramani's or as epic as Saleem's, stands as a reassuring certainty.

Conclusion: Rushdie Today

Midnight's Children and *East, West* exemplify Rushdie's writing during his early career, as *Midnight's Children* became Rushdie's first major success and the assorted stories from *East, West* were written throughout the early 1980s to mid 1990s. These two texts grapple with issues that were highly relevant at the time of their publication, as Rushdie addresses India's development as an independent nation, the relationship between and the perception of the East and the West, and the positions of postcolonial scholars at the time. Several decades later, these texts are relics of an earlier era, as more than 60 years have passed since India gained its independence, and scholarly discussion of the binary of East and West has been replaced with talk of the global North and South. Despite the constantly changing landscape that serves as the backdrop to postcolonial studies, many of the same themes which dominate Rushdie's

early works, including the experiences of newly-independent nations and the challenges of migration and cultural alienation, continue to capture the interest of scholars and everyday readers alike.

The timelessness of Rushdie's early works is complemented by the continued popularity of his more recent publications, including *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) and *Joseph Anton*, (2012), which focuses on Rushdie's ten years of hiding while under the fatwa declared by Ayatollah Khomeini. His popularity as an author has transformed Rushdie from a well-known writer to a cultural commodity. A willing interview subject, Rushdie often offers his opinions to the media, and his name consistently appears in stories by *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, and on the television screen during his interviews with the BBC and *The Today Show*.¹¹⁹ He serves as a go-to source for opinions about major events like the Arab Spring, and more recently, the violence in the Middle East that followed the release of the inflammatory video, *The Innocence of Muslims*. Controversy often follows the author, as his opinions tend to incite anger in his impassioned opponents. Most recently, and perhaps most dramatically, Iran's Ayatollah Hassan Sanei reissued the infamous fatwa against Rushdie, in response to the author's recent remarks denouncing Muslim attacks on U.S. embassies.¹²⁰ Though clearly Rushdie has not been the victim of any violence as a result of Sanei's declaration,

¹¹⁹ Denyer, Simon. "Rushdie Cancels India Visit after Death Threat," Mishra, Pankaj. "Why Salman Rushdie Should Pause before Condemning Mo Yan on Censorship." Meeting Salman Rushdie." *BBC News*," *TODAY.com*. "Salman Rushdie: Film That Sparked Mideast Unrest 'Disgraceful.'"

¹²⁰ Tait, Robert. "Iran Resurrects Salman Rushdie Threat."

the reissuing of the fatwa meant that, once again, Rushdie made the headlines on newspapers worldwide. The continued animosity against Rushdie remains, illuminated by not just the reimplementing of the fatwa, but also recent developments such as the video game released in Iran, which allows gamers to assassinate the author.¹²¹ The game “The Stressful Life of Salman Rushdie and the Implementation of his Verdict” reflects the extent to which Rushdie remains a target still apparently worthy of attention. The negativity surrounding Rushdie isn’t limited to Iran, as throughout the past year he faced boycotts at the Jaipur Literature Festival,¹²² and recent death threats have forced him to cancel speaking events.¹²³

Most recently, Rushdie has dealt with the repercussions of his controversial reputation as movie distributors in India shied away from the cinematic adaptation of *Midnight’s Children*. The movie, like the novel, criticizes Indira Gandhi, and with Gandhi’s daughter-in-law now leading the ruling Congress party, making the likelihood film’s release seem uncertain at best.¹²⁴ However, the film was released in India in February 2013, and its U.S. release is still forthcoming. Though the movie hasn’t reached American audiences yet, its attachment to Rushdie has piqued the media’s interest and his name is once again in the news and on the public’s mind. What makes Rushdie controversial and even threatening in

¹²¹ Baldauf, Scott. “Salman Rushdie, Now the Target of an Iranian Video Game.”

¹²² <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/asia-pacific/456252-rushdie-on-india-visit-politicians-boycott.html>

¹²³ Denyer, Simon. “Rushdie Cancels India Visit after Death Threat.”

¹²⁴ Lakshmi, Rama. “Salman Rushdie’s Movie Scares Film Distributors in India.”

India makes him an intriguing figure in the U.S. As movie producer and distributor Sunil Bohra explained, “The producers of the movie must think if it makes sense to attach Rushdie’s name to the movie in India. It worked around the world, but may not here.”¹²⁵ Years ago, when Rushdie wrote *Midnight’s Children* and the stories collected in *East, West*, it is doubtful that his name attracted much attention beyond its association with the writing he produced. But now, Rushdie’s fame has exceeded his reputation as an author, and while he still may address similar dilemmas about the relationships between areas of the world which tend to be fraught with uncertainty and hostility, he does so on a stage that is widely seen, easily accessible, and more dangerous than the pages of his novels.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

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Summary of Capstone Project

In my Capstone project, I analyze *East, West* and *Midnight's Children*, two works by Salman Rushdie, a British Indian novelist and essayist. A prolific writer, he's published nine novels, three short story collections, and multiple essays and non-fiction works during the course of his writing career, which began with his publication of *Grimus* in 1975. Much of his work is concerned with the relations between East and West, and he is well known for fusing historical stories with magical realism. This hybrid style is one of the aspects of Rushdie's write which I discuss in this paper, as it plays a major role in *Midnight's Children* and *East, West*.

East, West (1994) is an anthology of nine short stories which address the experience of physical and cultural migration. The text is divided into three sections, entitled "East," "West," and "East, West." In each of these sections, the stories relate to the geographical area and reveal the complex relationship between the characters and their location. Throughout the text Rushdie manipulates tropes of Eastern and Western culture, bringing into question the reader's assumptions about each area. The mutual influence that East and West share with each other is apparent, as Rushdie complicates the idea of a world divided by borders and cultural differences. In my analysis of the stories, I place the discussion in context

with the postcolonial discourse taking place at the time of the stories' publication, as well as including scholarly considerations on the relationship between postcolonialism and magical realism. *Midnight's Children* displays a similar use of magical realism, which Rushdie applies throughout the novel. The text corresponds with the history of India, as it follows India from its transition from British colonial rule to independence and the turmoil that follows. Told through the perspective of Saleem Sinai, who is born on the day of India's independence, the story follows Saleem from birth to death and reveals the correlation between major events in his life to occurrences in India's history.

More than thirty years after its publication, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a hallmark of postcolonial literature and Rushdie himself a popular figure in the public eye. After earning the Booker Prize in 1981, *Midnight's Children* was named the Best of the Booker in 1993, and continues today to generate extensive scholarly analysis of the novel's statements on identity and nation, and its use of allegory and magical realism. With a film adaptation currently in the works, it's clear that *Midnight's Children* still stands firmly in the public sphere, along with many of Rushdie's well-known novels, such as the infamous *Satanic Verses*, which after its publication in 1988 so offended members of the Muslim community that riots and book burning broke out, and Rushdie was forced into hiding with a fatwa on his head. Rushdie's short stories are less popular, but like his novels, often address common themes, as he

discusses nationhood, migration, and identity in many of his works. There is a distinct lack in academic writing surrounding *East, West*, Rushdie's collection of nine short stories, six of which had been released independently in other publications prior to their placement in this book. Published in 1994, *East, West's* release coincided with the rising popularity of postcolonial studies, as scholarly thought moved from comparative postcolonial studies to location-specific examinations, in a shift against which Rushdie's novel stands in opposition. The construction of East and West as separate, opposing sides of a binary was certainly not new to postcolonial studies in the nineties, but the idea was powerfully reinforced by Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilization theory in 1993, and the complexities of the East/West binary were emphasized by the forces of globalization, making *East, West* relevant to the discourse surrounding the postcolonial topics of the time period.

Both *Midnight's Children* and *East, West* reflect Rushdie's early examinations of some of the most central tenets of colonial discourse, as in his short stories he explores and complicates the positions of and relationships between what he portrays as the not-so distinct entities of East and West. While the stories of *East, West* largely address postcolonial relations through the lens of characters' perspectives, in *Midnight's Children* the state itself becomes a central figure as Rushdie takes on the issue of nationhood, examining the transformation of India from a colonial possession to an independent nation. These two texts are united not only

by their thematic elements but also by Rushdie's unique application of magical realism, the evolution of which is visible in the differences between Rushdie's stylistic decisions in *Midnight's Children* versus *East, West*. Separated by more than a decade, the texts reflect Rushdie's changing perspective as a writer but also demonstrate Rushdie's driving interests which remained dominant in his earlier years of writing.